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OCEANIA

A JOURNAL DEVOTED TO THE STUDY OF THE NATIVE PEOPLES OF AUSTRALIA, NEW GUINEA AND THE ISLANDS OF THE PACIFIC OCEAN

VOLUME II

1931 - 1932

[title page]

CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS OF THE NATIVES OF BUKA

By GORDON THOMAS

131 BUKA is a small island, thirty miles long and ten miles wide, lying north of Bougainville and is the most northerly isle of the Solomons, though politically it is included in the Mandated Territory of New Guinea.

773 823 According to Buka legend the island was created when a god and goddess arrived from out of the south (Bougainville) and, travelling in a *mon* (canoe) to the northward, the island of Buka arose in the wake of the *mon*. At various intervals the god threw away the husks of betel-nut which he was chewing and these, in turn, became the small islands off the west coast of Buka. While the god steered the coast line was straight; later when the goddess piloted the craft the course was crooked and hence the large harbour at the north-west end of the island. Upbraiding the goddess, the god resumed the steering and eventually arrived back at the starting point, leaving behind a straight coast line.

196 The word in the Buka language to designate a white man is *tolala* and had its origin when the first sailing ship was sighted by a Buka man standing on the beach. The huge spread of canvas appearing on the horizon seemed to the astonished native nothing more than an island approaching. Excitedly he called out: "*A tol alana mayen!* (An island is coming here!)" When it was found that white men were aboard they received the name formed by the first part of the native's cry.

881 Like most tribes of Melanesia their initiation ceremonies for youths to enter manhood are of paramount importance, and are still maintained with great secrecy, though missionary and government influence has done much to eliminate many of the more savage rites. Weeks before the ceremony the great spirit, Ndook, can be [776] heard calling in the bush, warning the community of its advent so as to prepare pigs for his feasting. The women—particularly the

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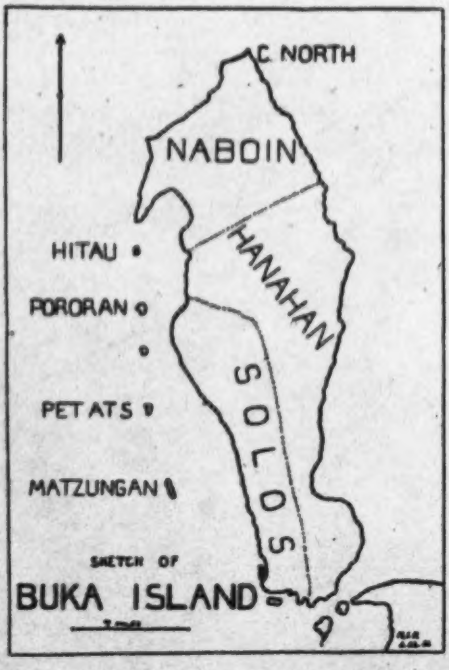
mothers and relations of youths ready for initiation—show signs of great agitation; and owners of pigs commence wondering whether they will be called upon to supply one or two porkers from their precious herd. The ceremony is conducted by the head-men of a community, and it is these men who disappear into the bush and



create the cries of Ndook by medium of the bull-roarer and another instrument consisting of a half coconut shell with a small portion of a coconut leaf stretched across the opening. This, used in a manner similar to that in which children play on a comb and paper, creates a most eerie sound. Those men whom the head-men have decided should supply pigs are warned of this by a huge stick (used for carrying trussed pigs) being mysteriously thrust through the doors of their houses at night. Refusal to obey such an edict was, and sometimes still is, punishable by death.

535 The Buka dance or *guma* is an uninteresting spectacle. Unlike other Melanesian dances there is very little action and the [533] accompanying singing is but a constant repetition of "O-a-o-a" in as many keys as the human voice is capable of rendering. The men walk slowly around in a circle while the women, standing some ten yards away, advance to the edge of the circle from time to time and in pairs bend their bodies backwards and forwards, or in threes and fours skip sideways to and fro. From a distance the singing is often harmonious, but when heard at close quarters it is both ear-splitting and appalling to a musical listener.

[534] 202 The singing is accompanied by the beating of the hollowed-out wooden drums (*tui*) with series of short staccato raps from the soft-nosed beaters. These *tui* can be heard for many miles when weather conditions are favourable and are used extensively for signalling. Some of the Buka districts have elaborate *tui* codes, and are able to send detailed messages from village to village. Among the more [763] simplified signals is that denoting a death and is made by ten long beats, pause, three short, pause, three short, pause, five short, pause, five short, pause, and ten long. When a man is annoyed over something (his wife has failed to cook the taro, or a pig has died) and he wishes to "tell the world" he raps out ten long beats, a pause, then another ten long beats. The arrival of a stranger in a village is denoted by three long beats, pause, followed by three series of seven short beats interspersed with pauses. The general call to assemble in a village is three series of three shorts and one long beat.

302 [346] The men usually wear their hair long and combed upright. The hair of a woman is close-cropped, except when she has given birth to a child and then it is allowed to grow long until the child is able to crawl about. The women wear a hood made from pandanus 291 leaves sewn horizontally together, with every other leaf dyed red 386 with the root of a bush. This custom is to prevent certain of their male relatives from seeing their hair, which is taboo. A loin cloth 291 of red or coloured print serves as the general garment for both sexes. 177 A few years ago the women wore a small grass *tahu*, and in former days the men wore no covering.

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Each village has, amongst its older men and women, some with 278
a very fair knowledge of native medicines and also, unfortunately, 757
one or two with a secret knowledge of poisons. The administration
of curative and prophylactic medicines is usually accompanied by
elaborate rites which the patient must rigidly observe. Contra-
ceptives are commonly used by the women and one herb is claimed
to be what might be termed a " contra-contraceptive," *i.e.*, after
a woman has been barren for several years, as a result of taking a
contraceptive, this herb will make her fertile again. When epidemics 751
occur villages as yet untouched will place small sticks, leaning out-
wards, on the various roads to ward off the arrival of the spirit of
sickness. The sticks are smeared with the spittle of betel-nut, 763
pepper and lime. If the cry of a certain night-bird is heard over a 787
village where a patient lies dangerously ill, it is usual then for any
further attempt to combat the illness to cease. Death has spoken.
The bird's call is looked upon as the inevitable token of death, and
the relations commence to gather together their presents for the dead
in readiness for throwing them into the coffin or grave. It is strange,
but the cases where to my own knowledge the bird's call has actually
preceded the death of a patient have been numerous.

DRUM SIGNALLING ON PORORAN ISLAND

Pororan legend has it that in the days of long ago (*manus*) 773
before drum signalling had been introduced a strange resonant noise 534
was heard coming from the bush by the men of the village one
evening. Half fearful investigations were made and it was found
that the noise came from a swinging branch beaten by the wind upon
a hollow tree. From this sprang the idea of the *tui*, or wooden
drum, which is used so extensively throughout Buka, Bougainville
and other Melanesian islands.

The making of these drums in the early days, before steel 534
implements were introduced, was a long, tedious and almost sacred
performance. In many of the *tui* the aperture at the top is but an
inch to an inch and a half in width extending the full length of the
drum, while the outer circumference measures in many cases as
much as eight feet six inches. Sharpened clam-shells, fastened to [413]
spear hafts or long sticks were the only tools used for the work.

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534 Even to this day the process is similar except that steel chisels and [177] adzes have been brought into play by the experts.

[184] The size of the *tui* varies. On Pororan Island (situated five miles west of the Buka mainland) there are three standard sizes: the *tui*, the *halan* and the *king*. The former measures about eight feet long and four feet high; the *halan*, five feet by two feet, and the *king* three feet by one foot.

The fact that the word *tui* is used for the large drum and *king* for the smaller size prompted me to make searching enquiry as to their etymological origin to see if I might connect them with the Fijian *tui* (king) but, so far as I can gather, the words originated simply from their close resemblance to the sound which both these instruments make.

202 For signalling the *tui* is used exclusively, and one is to be found in every *tsuhan*, or master's house, in the village. The beating is done by hitting the drum sharply, near the top in the centre with [824] the soft-nosed *tsinoi*, or beater, which consists of a number of thick strips of the lawyer vine about six feet in length, bound closely together at the striking end, allowing the other end of the strips to remain loose. These, by a certain twist of the wrist, create a rustling accompaniment to the beats when excitement runs high during a dance. No special men in a village are invested with the privilege of beating a *tui*, though uninitiated boys are not supposed to do so. Women, on the occasion of their own dances, are allowed to beat one.

535 533 During dances (*guma*) the *tui* and *king* are used. The *king* commences and continues with a uniform series of short beats, which attain a higher and more penetrating note than the deep-toned *tui*, even as the word *king* when pronounced sharply. The *tui* beats are varied according to the humour and the ability of the man employed as beater. Usually the beats are:

— — — . . . . . — — — — . . . . . —[1]

Beats continue for a period of from one to two minutes and then *tui* and *king* cease simultaneously, the signal being two or three louder beats made on the *tui*. If the cessation of beats is not simul-

[1] A long beat is represented by a dash; a short one by a dot.

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taneous the dancers and singers show their disapproval by a series of cat-calls and disparaging remarks on the ability of the beaters.

Throughout the main island of Buka and the adjacent islands there is one signal which is commonly known. That is the one announcing the arrival of a stranger or strangers of importance to the village. This signal is called *asosoat*, and is the only signal which is generally adopted. Each district has a code of its own, and these codes seem to be governed according to the distribution of dialectical change.[1]

The Pororan signalling code is limited in comparison with that of the Solos district, where the inhabitants are solely bush natives and have an extensive and detailed code. The chief Pororan signals, made up of *sinak* (long beats) and *katut* (short beats), consist of:

1. General muster (*ngong-ngok*): ... — ... — ... —
2. Call for the chief (*ngong-ngok*): ——— ... —.——— ... —. — —
3. The arrival of a stranger of importance (*asosoat*): ——— ....
4. A death (*tan ni matano*): ———————— ... ... ————————
5. Purchasing a wife when the bride-price, or *tsinahan*, has been paid (*tsinahan*): —— — — — — — . . . . . — . . . . . —— ....—— ——— ..... ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— ——— —— . . . — . — . — —.—.— —.—.— —.—.— —.—.— —.—.— —.—.— —.—.— —.—.— ———— —

6 Various stages of house-building, *i.e.*, gathering the timber, leaf, erecting the posts, etc., etc.

7. Various stages of a feast and its preparation, *e.g.*, erecting the food-beds, tying the pigs, cooking taro, killing the pigs, cutting up and counting the food after it is placed on the beds ready for distribution.

8. Annoyance (*sikot*): —

[1] Hitan and Pororan Islands use the same code; Petats has a slight variation to that used by Pororan. Matzungan uses the Hanahan code with a few slight variations.

202 9. General dancing and singing (*guma*).

10. Killing of a captive (man) for food (*kura kura*).

11. Theft (*kope-kope*) : — — — — — — — — — — — — ..

12. To ripen the *wungal* (nut). One is placed in the fire and is followed by : .. .. —

13. To drive away sickness. All men armed with coconut leaves, sticks and spears proceed to the village boundary while the women remain in the houses and each *tui* in the village signals in turn : ..... —

Counting is done by repeating the signal — . — . — (which is shown in the " purchase of a wife " signal to the extent of nine, representing the fathoms of native money paid). In counting food such as taro, coconuts, etc., when numbers exceed ten then the signal is abbreviated to — . — for each item. All counting is done by the one code. When a feast is about to be held natives from neighbouring villages are able to ascertain the number of pigs that have been killed for the feast, and also how far the preparations have progressed in order to time their arrival at the scene of feasting at an opportune moment.

News of importance, *e.g.*, the arrival of a government official, is relayed from village to village. In the Solos district the natives also detail the number of police-boys, carriers and boxes in the party.

202 533 177 In recent years as a result of the influence of the white man, the younger generation who are losing many of the old tribal customs, are inclined to improvise new beats for the dance accompaniments based on the staccato noise of a schooner's auxiliary engine exhaust. This, unfortunately, is but one of the many innovations which are being introduced through white influence, and, in the next decade or so, many of the old-time customs will have disappeared entirely.

OBSERVATIONS ON THE INITIATION CEREMONY OF PORORAN

881 177 The Ndook ceremony for the initiation of youths on Pororan at the present time is similar, in many respects, to that which was performed on full-grown men in the earlier days, though previously greater secrecy was maintained and admission was not granted to every man, but reserved as a mark of merit or honour amongst the

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fighting-men. This change is but another proof of the decadence of old-time customs in Buka.

Initiates of today range from nine to fifteen years of age. They undergo no particular preparation other than strict instructions to do as they are told by the older men. Initiates are called *tseuen*, those already initiated are termed *putz-putzi*, and the chiefs, masters and headmen are known as *muri-na-lium*.

When a meeting of *muri-na-lium* decides to hold a Ndook ceremony (such decision being governed by the number of candidates available) word is sent to all *putz-putzi* one or two months prior to the fixed date. A general meeting is held and ways and means decided upon for obtaining taro; the making of *makot* (scraped taro and coconut oil); the guests to be invited; those *muri-na-lium* who will exhibit totem figures, and the number of *bahuan* figures that will be made. The supplying of pigs is left to one or two of the older chiefs who secretly despatch a third man to the houses of owners of good fat pigs. This man stealthily thrusts a thick stick, used for carrying trussed pigs, through the doors of the pig-owners. This is a direct sign from Ndook that the owner must provide a pig for the spirit. Failure to do so would entail death. Such penalties have been enforced even of late years.

The totem figures are called *malai*, and are representative of either the *kekiliau* (bush fowl) or *naboin* (sea hawk) totems, which are the only two existing in Buka. The figures, carved from soft timber, take the form of a huge bird gaudily painted with native pigments, stencil ink purloined from some neighbouring plantation, or washing blue. They represent the spirit of a deceased chief or headman belonging to the *muri-na-lium* exhibiting the *malai*. Usually four or five *malai* appear at a ceremony from one village.

The *bahuan*, or secondary spirits (considering Ndook as being of the first order), consist of wooden images seven to eight feet high carved also from soft wood (see Plate II, A). They are attached at the base to long sticks which enable them to be lifted by the *putz-putzi*, who are covered with leaves or bushes. The *bahuan* also represent deceased chiefs of the same totem as the *muri-na-lium* exhibiting them. Keen rivalry is evinced in making these carvings. Sometimes the arms, mouth, tongue, penis or hands are manipulated

776 by means of a string. The *bahuan* shown in Plate II, B, was ac-
778 claimed a work of art by the spectators. It consisted of a frame-
532 work of rattan covered with black calico, beneath which a *muri-na-lium* danced and gyrated.

881 Ceremonies are held in a special taboo area upon which no
688 woman is permitted at any time to tread. Any matters connected with Ndook are kept strictly secret from the women (*be-hay*, as Ndook has named them). If one of them trespasses on this ground, catches sight of a carving to be used in a ceremony, or acquires any knowledge of the Ndook, she is put to death even today.

881 A week to ten days prior to the date of the ceremony *putz-putzi*
776 are detailed to wander about the taboo ground operating the *liahan* and *rago*. The former is a bull-roarer which is looked upon as being the voice of the chief spirit or god. (The word *liahan* seems to signify god rather than a spirit, inasmuch as Liahan is the omnipotent creator of everything. He is invisible, and no attempt has been made to create his likeness in an image as has been done to spirits.)
[534] The *rago* is an oscillatory-ribbon-reed instrument[3] consisting of a portion of a coconut leaf tied between two thin strips of stick and fastened into half a coconut shell. A shrill piercing note is given out when the instrument is blown upon. The *rago* represents the cry of Ndook's wife. These cries are continued throughout the days and nights prior to the ceremony and increase in volume and frequency as the appointed day approaches. Along certain highways the travels of Ndook are marked by bushes being trampled down and small trees uprooted.

881 Guests from neighbouring islands arrive quietly during the night prior to the ceremony and land near the ceremonial ground, keeping hidden from any women and *tseezen*.

When all preparations have been made, *bahuan* and *malai* completed, beds for food erected, and the various *putz-putzi* detailed to their tasks of operating the *bahuan*, carrying *malai* or merely to act as members of the attacking party, the *tseezen* are called from their respective houses by six or seven *muri-na-lium*. They emerge
[386] half-fearfully with painted faces and hair oiled and smeared with

[3] *Notes and Queries*, Fifth Ed., page 303.

red oxide paint and struggle to escape the retaining holds of their mothers. The *muri-na-lium* wildly brandish spears and axes to frighten the women.

All *tseezen* are then paraded in a circle as a farewell to their mothers and female relatives. The women fling themselves down upon the ground, crying and moaning and calling on their sons to remain with them rather than brave the dangers of Ndook. They work themselves into a paroxysm of fear and reach a stage bordering hysteria. (I have noted occasions when several women in throwing themselves upon the ground have become divested of their loin-cloths and, quite oblivious of the fact, have rolled about naked. At the present time a Pororan woman would ordinarily never do this. As the *tseezen* march around accompanied by the *muri-na-lium* the latter keep the women at a distance with the aid of their weapons. After half-an-hour or so the *tseezen* are led away to the ceremonial ground, followed as far as the boundary of the village by a wailing hysterical crowd of female relatives. When they arrive at the ground they are ranged in a line, together with their guards, who hold each one by the arm to prevent his escape.

From every direction there then arises the cry of the *liahan* and the squawking piercing notes of the *rago*. From the direction whence the *bahuan* and the *malai* will come then rise the shouts of the *muri-na-lium* and the *putz-putzi* as they slowly advance through the bush. As they emerge, covered in bush leaves or thin strips of coconut fronds (see Plate II, B), and carrying the images a small number of the *muri-na-lium* rush toward them and engage in a mock fight, their purpose being to make a pretence of defending the *tseezen* from the ravages of Ndook. Sometimes an attacker will rough-handle a *tseezen* for a few moments, but seldom is any bodily harm done in these conflicts. The *bahuan* and the *malai* are then placed in the centre of the clearing and are surrounded by the *putz-putzi*. Here they remain for a short space of time and are then taken away to the bush with much shouting, accompanied by the roarings of the *liahan* and cries of the *rago*. The *muri-na-lium* then explain to the newly-initiated youths the absolute necessity for strict secrecy to be maintained towards all *tseezen* and women in respect of what they have seen. The penalty following any breach is death.

881 breach is death. The chief now gives each initiate a new name,
[553] which must never be changed or dropped. The names chosen are those of deceased *putz-putzi*, who thus continue, in name, to be present at such ceremonies. This custom is for the pleasure of Ndook as well as for the spirits of the departed.

While this is in progress one or more *muri-na-lium* visit the village where the women are still wailing and relate how So-and-so has been dissected by Ndook: his legs are in one island, his head in another, and his arms in still another. Occasionally one of the men smears his body with pig's blood and, standing before several of the women, relates how he was holding his child when Ndook killed him in his arms. Similar anecdotes are related by the newly initiated when they return to their mothers. The explanation for their safe return is that after Ndook had appeased his appetite with pig and taro he relented and restored them to their mothers.

Food is then divided, and as each section or village receives its portion, the men, placing the baskets on their heads, dance in the centre of the ground. They then retire to consume the food, which is known as *goagon* (sacred food). The women are not told that the men eat the food, which is ostensibly supplied for the consumption of Ndook, who if not well fed will wreak his vengeance upon the initiates. All traces of food are removed from the person and hands and faces washed before the men return to the village. They usually pretend to be hungry, and ask at once for something to eat.

842 The natives of Pororan believe that if a married man has sexual
845 intercourse with his wife on the same night that he returns from a ceremony then she will bear twins. If a pregnant woman crosses the path made by Ndook in his travels the child when born will be deformed.

177 The inclusion of the wooden carvings in the Pororan Ndook
778 ceremony is only of very recent origin, dating from 1928. They are
88 copies of the images used in the Sailou district, north Bougainville,
[534] where initiation ceremonies form a far more important part of the ceremonial life than on Buka. These images were first imported
[139] into Malasang district, south Buka, in about 1920, being purchased with native money. From here they found their way to Hanahan. Prior to this date there were no images, and the ceremony consisted

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CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS OF THE NATIVES OF BUKA. PLATE I.
Tui *and* King *with Beaters.*

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CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS OF THE NATIVES OF BUKA. PLATE II.
A. *Two* bahuan *and four* malai *images.* B. *A group of* tseezen *and* putz-putzi *with a* bahuan *image.*

[p.230(B)]

chiefly of lewd dancing and feasting. Boys were often initiated when little more than babies. They were snatched from their mothers' arms and taken to the bush. Coconut water was poured over them and their skins covered with broken pieces of leaf and grass. On being returned to their mothers it was explained that the children had been eaten by Ndook, passed through his stomach and evacuated. The slime and grass gave proof to this story.

Though great importance is attached to this ceremony now, I am of the opinion that the clandestine feasting and the desire to exhibit better images than other districts are of greater import to the *muri-na-lium* than the actual initiation ceremony. The prominence which is given to the *bahuan* and *malai* images seems to point to a form of spirit cult which is of but recent introduction. The time devoted to the *tseezen* is negligible in comparison with the labour expended upon the carvings, the preparation of food and the various deceptions practised upon the women.

The legend regarding the discovery of the *liahan* seems to point to the fact that the original idea of the Ndook ceremony was to enable the men to foregather secretly in the bush and there gorge themselves with food and give vent to lewd dances without the encumbrance or interference of the women.

The *liahan* or bull-roarer according to Pororan legend was discovered by a woman while she was cutting firewood in the bush. A piece of the wood hurtled through the air and made a mysterious noise. Curiosity prompted her to tie a piece of vine to the wood and whirl it about her head. Picking up her bundle of firewood she placed the thin blade with the vine attached on top and started homeward. On her way she met her husband, who noticed the blade and enquired the reason for the attached vine. She gave him an illustration. He confiscated it and showed it to several of the headmen. It was a novelty, something which had never been seen before. They decided it should be used as the voice of the god or spirit Liahan. The women was killed and the secret kept only amongst the older men. They said that the omnipotent Liahan was demanding food. When it had been collected this food was taken into the bush and eaten by the headmen and the chiefs.

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